

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

27 April 1970

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Hanoi's Strategy and the Cambodian Situation

I. CAMBODIA'S ROLE IN THE WAR

1. Since late 1965, Cambodia has played a major role in Hanoi's strategy for taking over South Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists have made use of its territory for tactical sanctuary, for base areas, for infiltration of personnel, and for shipment of supplies; they have also procured arms, food and other supplies from Cambodian sources. If Hanoi were unable to use Cambodia for these purposes, it would have to reassess its capabilities for continuing the struggle in South Vietnam along present lines.

2. Hanoi's most immediate concern would be the loss of sanctuary for Communist forces operating in the relatively open, densely-populated,

This Memorandum has been coordinated with representatives of OCI, OER, SAVA, and the Agency Cambodian Task Force.

25X1

SECRET

and heavily-garrisoned areas of IV Corps and southern III Corps -- the Delta and the Saigon region. Safe haven in Cambodia is less important further north where the rugged, densely-forested, and lightly-held South Vietnamese highlands provide more elbow room for Communist forces on the move or at rest.

3. Hanoi would also anticipate severe damage if it lost use of its base areas in Cambodia. VC/NVA elements have turned these areas into comprehensive military installations where troops and new recruits are received, supplied, and trained, military and political headquarters staffs maintained, and fighting forces receive refuge and medical treatment. Some base areas contain sizeable ordnance depots. Clearly, these base areas provide the foundation upon which rest Communist expectations of maintaining an effective military-political apparatus in southern South Vietnam while the US withdrawal proceeds.

4. The northerly base areas, opposite II Corps and northern III Corps, do serve as safe havens for B-3 Front troops, but they also facilitate the southward movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies toward COSVN and eastward into the highlands of South Vietnam. They constitute, in effect, an extension of the Laos corridor -- but a sector in which the NVA has

SECRET

SECRET

enjoyed virtual immunity from Allied attack. To the extent that the Communists were denied free use of these areas, their forces in the highlands of South Vietnam could suffer a loss in combat effectiveness and increased casualties.

5. The southerly base areas, opposite the Delta and the Saigon region, have grown rapidly in size and importance over the past two years as Hanoi sought to limit exposure of its main force units and reduce casualties while attempting to halt the erosion of its political-military base in this populous and decisive theater. The bases are situated in well populated areas, many in villages and plantations inhabited by ethnic Vietnamese and controlled by Communists since the days of the Viet Minh.

6. The Cambodian base structure, as noted above, supports infiltration of NVA personnel into South Vietnam, and the shift of units from one portion of South Vietnam to another, as in the case of the movement of NVA regiments into the Delta last year. The infiltration system through Cambodia handled nearly 65,000 NVA personnel in 1969, an estimated 60 percent of total NVA infiltration into South Vietnam in that year; about 50,000 moved as far as the southerly base areas subordinate to COSVN. The foot trails used lie very close to the border and occasionally cross into South Vietnamese territory; they are, for the most part, heavily canopied and secure from aerial

SECRET

SECRET

observation. The trip from the Laos border to the "Parrot's Beak" opposite Saigon takes 45 to 60 days though it is unimpeded by Allied action.

7. The Communists' north-south logistic route through Cambodia has few motorable segments and is mainly a network of trails and waterways. Occasionally, it utilizes the same trails as the personnel infiltration system. It has never been possible to quantify the north-south movement of supplies to VC/NVA forces in South Vietnam via Cambodia, but there is evidence that the trails are being constantly improved and that supplies are being moved. Over the past year, in particular, the demands of the new NVA force in the Delta would have greatly increased Communist supply requirements there.

8. Cambodia itself has long been an important source of supplies for the Vietnamese Communists. They obtain there some medical supplies, chemicals useful in the manufacture of explosives, and communications equipment. But easily the most important of the non-military shipments from Cambodian sources is food, mainly rice. Cambodian rice is probably the main source of food for VC/NVA troops in the rice-deficit highlands of II Corps and northern III Corps. It may have become important over the past year or so to the growing force further south where Allied rice denial operations have been increasingly successful.

SECRET

SECRET

9. The complete denial of Cambodian rice would hamper Communist forces in the highlands, but even in this extreme case Hanoi could in time develop alternate means of supplying these forces, either from North Vietnam or from elsewhere in South Vietnam. As for the COSVN sectors, the need for rice is one aspect of the general urgency to extend control from present base areas somewhat deeper into Cambodia where rice is produced greatly in excess of current Communist military needs in III and IV Corps.

10. Chinese Communist ordnance moving through Sihanoukville once constituted a major supply item for Communist forces in southern South Vietnam. A complete and reliable accounting is not available, but it is estimated that at least 2,000 tons of ordnance, landed at Sihanoukville, were delivered to the Communists by official Cambodian intermediaries between October 1968 and January 1970. This figure is equal to about one-half of the Communist resupply requirement in this period for arms and ammunition in southern II Corps, III Corps, and IV Corps. At the same time, however, it is believed that more than enough ordnance has been delivered over the years to South Vietnam via the Laos corridor to meet our estimates of Communist requirements in the war. Thus, the loss of Sihanoukville -- never a completely reliable route from the Communist viewpoint -- is probably not viewed as a critical setback by the Communists, so long as the overland trails are available.

SECRET

SECRET

II. HANOI'S CURRENT ASSUMPTIONS

11. Our estimates of Hanoi's operating assumptions are based on its recent actions in Cambodia, on a number of pertinent captured COSVN directives, and on our judgments of the importance of Cambodia to the North Vietnamese military effort.

12. Arms from Sihanoukville. Even at this early date, Hanoi's leaders may consider some of the adverse military effects of the turnabout in Phnom Penh as essentially irretrievable. For example, Hanoi probably sees little likelihood of renewed arms shipments via Sihanoukville in the foreseeable future. Even if the Lon Nol regime were somehow bullied into accepting such deliveries, Hanoi could not be sanguine that agreements would be honored. Moreover, Hanoi might anticipate a US effort -- utilizing one political justification or another -- to intercept or destroy such shipments even if Sihanouk resumed control in Phnom Penh with Hanoi's backing.

13. The Northeast. Hanoi also probably counts on some US bombing of its sanctuaries, bases, and routes in northeastern Cambodia. Unlike the border further south, the region is very sparsely populated and includes few Khmers, so that bombing would not trouble Lon Nol nor be likely to raise much outcry against the Americans. Much of the region is less mountainous and

SECRET

~~SECRET~~

enjoys better weather than the Laos corridor, making aerial observation easier. If the region were under the control of "liberation forces", US restraint would, in the Communist view, be even less likely.

14. In the borders of II Corps and northern III Corps, the Communists may increase the weight of their attacks on Allied fire-bases and Special Forces camps in order to forestall Allied action across the frontier. But it seems more likely that they will make fewer attacks, since they will be unsure of security as they mass and unsure of sanctuary as they withdraw.

15. In Laos, political restraints and rugged terrain have until now protected the Communists from pursuit by Allied forces on the ground. The Cambodian terrain is much less forbidding, however, and the Communists may reason that at least in the remote northeast, Allied political inhibitions may be disappearing.

16. In sum, in northeastern Cambodia the Communists probably anticipate a more difficult military environment, shorn of much of the extraordinary freedom and security enjoyed by their troops throughout the war. Nonetheless, the Communists will probably continue their efforts to infiltrate troops, move supplies, and conduct large-scale operations -- much as they presently do further north in the Laos corridor and in I Corps.

~~SECRET~~

SECRET

17. COSVN -- Saigon and the Delta: As Hanoi looks southward, it must perceive more serious problems. Although Communists probably discount the likelihood of Allied action with which they could not cope, they cannot be certain of Allied plans regarding the frontier region. In Hanoi's view, the loss of effective control of the bases in the south, and the territory surrounding them, would be a setback of critical proportions, calling into question the possibility of maintaining a viable Communist military-political position in southern South Vietnam for the longer haul. Even the psychological impact of the loss would be profoundly disturbing to Hanoi; the Saigon regime would be greatly heartened and Allied political figures would be less inclined than ever to settle the war on Communist terms. Thus, for Hanoi, it must appear imperative to hold the key bases in southern Cambodia and to ensure their security against incursions from any quarter. Recent Communist action against Cambodian units in their midst, and Communist assaults on key road junctions between Phnom Pehn and the border attest to the seriousness of Hanoi's intent in this regard.

18. Hanoi probably assumes that, as in the northeast, its southern base areas and sanctuaries will be increasingly subject to Allied incursions, harassments, and limited air attacks. And perhaps Cambodian attacks as well. There is probably little concern in Communist ranks over the net impact of the Cambodian forces, even if supplied with US arms. It is

SECRET

SECRET

probably assumed that if Lon Nol cannot be pressured into calling off his attacks, he can be driven from strategic Communist areas with a relatively small commitment of VC/NVA troops. If this judgment were proved wrong and Lon Nol became a persistent nuisance, Hanoi would almost certainly mount a major attack against the Cambodian Army if not Phnom Penh itself.

19. Hanoi is probably much more concerned about the possibility of ARVN attacks -- both ground and air. Not that the North Vietnamese have ceased believing in their innate superiority over Saigon's forces, but there must be an appreciation of the rapid and considerable Communist effort required if the heretofore secure bases in Cambodia are to be defended against determined attacks. For Hanoi, there is the sobering possibility that large scale ARVN attacks might soon be initiated which, if successful, could change the climate of US and GVN opinion about the struggle in South Vietnam. For Hanoi, therefore, the issue of the southern bases cannot be allowed to simmer; its determination to hold these positions must be clearly shown and their overall defensibility demonstrated, particularly to the US.

III. HANOI'S PROBABLE ACTIONS

20. With base areas in the south to be secured and threats to military positions in the northeast to be minimized, the Communists are moving

SECRET

SECRET

rapidly to establish their control along the border and further westward to a depth consistent with their military needs. The Communists appear reasonably confident that these measures will meet their immediate needs. While it is possible that the Communists, if pressured, would abandon certain less defensible base areas, it is unlikely that important ones would be dropped except as a result of major Allied efforts. And if such efforts were not sustained, the bases would probably soon be re-established, as has often occurred in South Vietnam. Of course, the entire character of the Cambodian sanctuary will soon be in a process of change with new bases being developed in areas less accessible to Allied probes.

21 The next Communist move will rest on more complex considerations. Hanoi is probably not eager, at least at this juncture, to undertake another costly quasi-conventional campaign on the pattern of the current dry-season offensive in northern Laos. And "liberation forces" capable of taking over major Cambodian centers would take considerable time and energy to set in motion. Moreover, the Communists could not be certain that either of these somewhat blatant efforts to bite off larger chunks of Cambodia, if mounted, would not trigger an Allied military response of unexpected proportions. In any event, they would view adoption of a bold course as increasing the chance of Allied air and ground operations in Cambodia.

SECRET

~~SECRET~~

22. There are sound reasons, even though his regime is hostile, for Hanoi to seek a modus vivendi with Lon Nol. Thoroughly intimidated, the regime might not interfere with Communist operations in the border zones. And it might be pressured into dropping its pleas for heavy external aid.

23. It is possible, however, that Hanoi will not be greatly impressed with the risks involved in rapidly ousting the Lon Nol regime and reinstalling Sihanouk, viewing the opportunity to secure the Cambodian "domino" as irresistible at this time. It would alleviate Hanoi's frustrations over the situation in South Vietnam; provide a severe psychological shock to Saigon, Vientiane, and Bangkok; and would offer the US and the South Vietnamese the disheartening prospect of an indefinitely available Communist sanctuary -- 70,000 square miles in extent -- adjacent to South Vietnam's most populous provinces.

24. We cannot exclude the possibility that Hanoi will decide to move along this more aggressive course. But the situation is far more complicated for Hanoi than would be indicated by generalizations concerning its military capabilities and its ability to manipulate Sihanouk. Nothing is certain in war and the entire thrust of Hanoi's policy since mid-1968 has been to limit risks, to conserve resources, and to concentrate on getting the US out of

~~SECRET~~

SECRET

Vietnam. Hanoi is also, to some degree, preoccupied with domestic problems. The North Vietnamese would certainly measure carefully all alternatives before risking action which could impede the US withdrawal from South Vietnam and, perhaps, precipitate a wider Indochina conflict.

25. Barring large-scale and sustained Allied military efforts, the Communists can soon consolidate their expanded holdings within Cambodia and make necessary adjustments in their system of bases along the border. Temporarily, however, Communist preoccupations in Cambodia may lead to a reduction in VC/NVA activity, particularly in the Delta. Reduced activity in the south, however, might be compensated for by stepped-up activity in I and II Corps, where Communist capabilities are not likely to be greatly affected by the Cambodian problem at any early date.

26. Nor can we rule out, in the light of their current problems, a move by Hanoi to open negotiations for a new Indochina settlement or to seek some sort of cease-fire throughout the region. The current weaknesses in Hanoi's position in South Vietnam and the unsettled situations in Cambodia and Laos, however, argue against any early move of this sort.

27. Current developments in Cambodia, therefore, will bring at least temporary advantage to the non-Communist cause in South Vietnam by

SECRET

SECRET

easing pressures on ARVN and the pacification program, particularly in the Delta. In the longer term, however, the Communists could cope with some degradation of their Cambodian sanctuary by reorganizing supply lines, relocating bases, and adjusting combat tactics; this has been the experience of the past five years in South Vietnam. In the meantime, Cambodia will have suffered a debilitating internal struggle, with large areas lost to the Communists and the seeds of eventual Communist control spread widely elsewhere in the country.

SECRET

MEMORANDUM FOR: See Reverse

This Memorandum was prepared at the
request of the White House Staff.

AES

Attachment

28 April 1970

(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

(47)

MEMORANDUM FOR: See Reverse

This Memorandum was prepared at the request
of the White House Staff. It is sent you for your
information.

AES

Attachment

28 April 1970

(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

25X1

Approved For Release 2007/03/06 : CIA-RDP79R00967A000200010001-1

Approved For Release 2007/03/06 : CIA-RDP79R00967A000200010001-1